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ABSTRACT

Beginning with a review of recent literature on social conflict, this study adopts Coser's distinction between realistic conflict, which seeks to balance both sides of a disagreement, and nonrealistic conflict, which seeks domination by only one party. Where nonrealistic conflict develops in intense labor-management disputes in public school districts, citizen dissatisfaction results, according to Lutz and Iannaccone, in community-school board conflict. To investigate such conflicts, the authors of the present study sampled Pennsylvania school districts following the 1970 passage of a law (the Pennsylvania Public Employee Relations Act) giving public employees the "limited" right to strike. Of the 79 school districts for which superintendents returned usable questionnaires (a 70 percent response rate), 35 had experienced strikes between 1970 and 1974. In 20 of these 35 cases, findings indicate that high conflict public employee strikes generated community unrest that resulted in key personnel changes within 3 years following the strike, including the defeat of 42 incumbent board members and the dismissal of 17 superintendents. That only one district had a strike after key personnel changes had been made suggests, according to the authors, a significant relation between personnel turnover as a result of high conflict and eventual accommodation. (JBM)

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The Relationship Between High Labor-Management Confict and Turnover of Key School District Personnel

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Introduction

In the late nineteenth and early twentith centuries, industrial labor unions realized that they could pressure management for needed improvements through various forms of dissent, including the strike. For the most part, these labor-management conflicts centered upon the improvement of wages and working conditions. Unlike the private sector, public institutions have had a relatively short history of formalized labor-management interchange. While the American Federation of Teachers called on teachers to organize in the 1930's for the purpose of seeking needed improvements for themselves and their organizations;[1] it has been only within the past 20 years that some state governments have permitted collective bargaining for public employees.

In one of these actions, the State of Pennsylvania enacted a Public Employee Relations Act in 1970, mandating that boards of education formally recognize and bargain with local employee unions. While the introduction of a formal vehicle for dissent and mutual conflict resolution was not unique to Pennsylvania, the inclusion of a "limited right to strike" did have implications on the amount of conflict in the employer-employee relationship.

Because public school districts are social systems, conflict is bound to exist in varying degrees between the several components or factions of such organizations. Further there is a most common conflict between members whose job it is to produce that for which the organization exists, and those who are called upon to manage the organization. This conflict is described as a struggle to control, collect, and use power in order to affect organizational direction. Given the existence of this conflict between employees and employers in public school districts, what effect then will a more conflict oriented climate have on the key leaders of the organization? Dependent on the severity of the conflict would organizational leaders be able to hold their positions within the organization? And should leadership change occur due to

high conflict, would the adjustments or accommodations within the organization be more positive following such turnover?

In order to assemble a basis upon which to build a theoretical framework for the study, the literature related to culture, conflict, and the complexity of an educational system was reviewed.

Culture prescribes and designs guiding values and ideals which govern social organizations. Such organizations are made up of individual and group interaction and relations. "Culture and social organization interact in working out of man's relations to his physical environment and his fellow man".[2] The school district is a composite of several groups: the citizens of the community, the board of education, administrators, employee unions, and students. The culture of the community, being the "structural underpinning" of society, provides general rules of behavior. The interaction of groups in a school system focus on fulfilling personal needs and aspirations. When people from different groups have similar needs and aspirations, organizational progress is enhanced, and there is movement toward a common goal. When several persons in the same group have similar needs and aspirations but different from other groups, these desires may become a demand upon the other groups for a change in behavior.

As members of an institutionalized bureaucracy, school administrators have little margin for consideration of specific demands of individuals or self-interest groups. This lack of personalized consideration, whether for one person or a group, is the source of confrontation, often resulting in disagreement, frustration, and hostility. This potential for conflict due to the interactions and interrelationships among the units and the quest for power was part of the foundation upon which an understanding of schools as complex organizations is based. Therefore, an understanding of how the components of the organization deal with the established power structure and any intra- or inter-organizational conflict is essential knowledge of the total organization.

Mann[3] noted that the governance of public schools does not necessarily rest with the community. He pointed out the considerable gap between the knowledge bases of the public and the professional educator, thus retarding the public's ability to provide intelligent, substantive input to the governance process.

Cistone suggested that school boards are mostly self-perpetuating and non-representative of their constituency. Those members who exercise a leading role in educational policy-making are clearly a minority.[4] Furthermore, both Michael Smith and David Minar posited that most school board members defer their own independent decison-making to that of technical authority.[5] That is, while boards of education purport to be making decisions pertinent to the functioning of schools and based on direction from their community, they, in fact, yield their judgments and opinions to the paid professional; in most cases, the chief administrative officer, the superintendent.

Thus, the role of superintendent becomes a key position in the decision-making process and policy-setting procedure of public schools. The successful superintendent is one who helps the governance process by functioning as a politician, negotiator, and statesman. His/her charge is to provide adequate leadership through good communication practices in order to maintain organizational stability.

The remaining component in the organizational structure of schools is the employee. Both teachers and support staffs have, since the late 1960's, become increasingly more demanding of their rights to help govern the system they are a part of. They no longer accept a subsurvient position in the organization. Through the collective bargaining process, teachers have attempted to gain their share of the school district resources, whether economic or intangible in nature.

Therefore an environment exists where disagreement, confrontation, and conflict can become common place between teachers and their union leaders and the key leaders of the organization, superintendents and school board members.

The typology of social conflict was reviewed from several perspectives. Inter-organizational conflict, as described by Derr[6], has two dimensions - external and internal. Usually the conflict is caused by competition for economic resources, legitimate authority, popular support, or other resources that are scarce and are valued by the organization. Sometimes the competition is with a system or group external to the organization and sometimes it is with an internal sub-system acting as if it were external to the organization.

Coser[7] characterized conflict as either absolute or institutionalized, non-realistic or realistic.

Employee-employer conflict is much more institutionalized than absolute because the controls are such that a zero-sum outcome (total defeat or total victory of one of the contending parties) is not actively pursued; rather, resolution involving some form of mutual accommodation is sought as an acceptable form of termination. Collective bargaining provides a "game plan" which can channel conflict through normative regulations.

The institutionalized conflict depicted in Figure 1 can be characterized in Coser's terms as either non-realistic or realistic. If the conflict follows the latter route, either the parties in conflict experience a near equal amount of wins, or one party experiences a greater proportion of wins than the other. Sufficient wins for both sides tend to generate some acceptance of the views of the other party and promote agreement, while having one party dominate causes the conflict to move from realistic to non-realistic in the sense that the original realistic antagonism, seeking balance for the perpetual loser, is disallowed expression by the winner.

If the original institutionalized conflict follows the route of non-realistic conflict, there is a needed release of tension between the parties through the acting out of their aggressive energies. Finding an immediate solution to this situation which both sides could agree upon is not a primary concern; rather, developing a mechanism

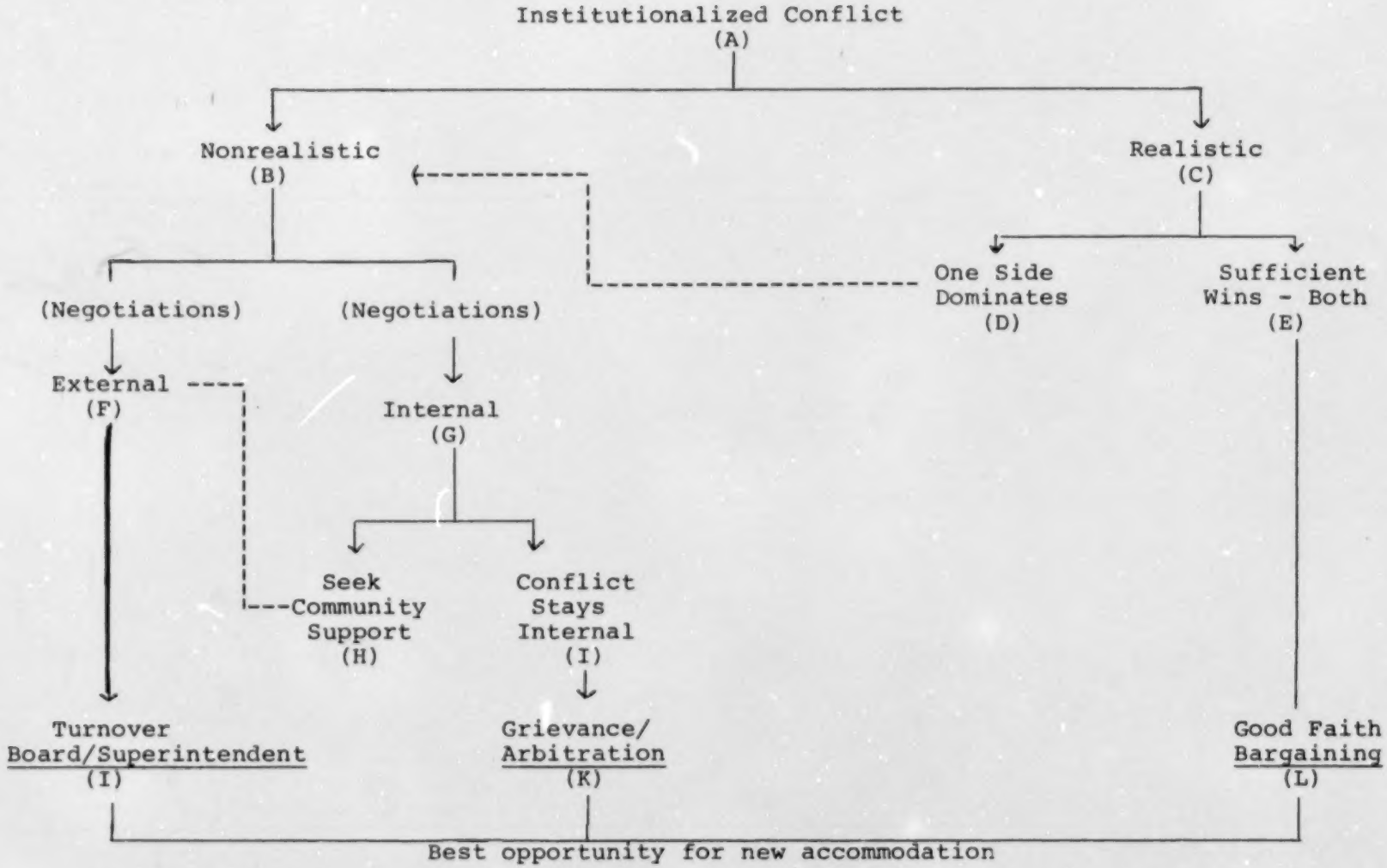

Figure 1. Interaction of Variables in the Labor-Management Conflict Theory of Turnover and Accommodation in Public Schools.

which would allow for considerable "sparring" is needed. In the case where the conflict remains inside the organizational structure, the aggressions of both parties are channeled into formalized, time-consuming grievance and/or arbitration procedures,during which each party vents frustrations in an expenditure of energy in reaction to a felt tension, or as an uncomfortable feeling and impatience over some disagreement.

While conflict has many psychological descriptors, its sociological aspects were most beneficial to this study. Contemporary sociologists view conflict as something which fosters social and organizational change. Ralf Dahrendorf was one of the first to suggest that a reformulation of the notion that conflict is something to be avoided and that social change is abnormal, since it deviated from an equilibriate state, was necessary. He postulated that "change is ubiquitous not only in time but also in space; that is to say, every part of every society is constantly changing...[8]" He further contended that the "great creative force" which leads to change, and which is equally ubiquitous, is social conflict.

According to the model, when the internal conflict becomes non-realistic one or both of the parties seek outside (community) support. As the conflict deepens and the community is affected, the community expresses dissatisfaction with the power structure of the system (board/superintendent) in that the community experiences frustration in being affected by the conflict yet relatively powerless to force resolution.

To explain the actions of the greater society (community), Lutz and Iannaccone propose a "Dissatisfaction Theory of Democratic Control."[9] Briefly they say that when school board decisions are not attuned to the values of the culture, citizen dissatisfaction results and eventually community-board conflict. This theory has been empirically supported in incumbent-school-board-member defeat research in which the

citizenry reacts to the board conflict by changing key school district leadership through elections and hence redirects the system toward equilibrium.

The Problem

The problem undertaken in this research was twofold. It was to investigate (1) whether a relationship existed between high labor-management conflict in public school districts and incumbent school board member defeat and/or superintendent turnover; and (2) whether a change in leadership personnel was positively related to any new accommodation between parties in high conflict districts.

Specifically, the following problems were addressed in the study. (1) In public school districts experiencing high conflict in contract settlements, was turnover of key personnel more likely to occur than in districts without conflict? (2) In public school districts experiencing high conflict in contract settlements, was turnover of board members more likely to occur than in districts without conflict? (3) In public school districts experiencing high conflict in contract settlements, was turnover of superintendents more likely to occur than in districts without conflict? (4) In public school districts experiencing high conflict, was the subsequent turnover of key personnel more positively related to new accommodation or acceptance than in high conflict districts experiencing no turnover?

The problems for the study were developed based on the previous research discussed as well as the research of Iannaccone and Lutz. They indicated that high conflict in public school districts would produce community unrest. This unrest would be expressed during elections, resulting in incumbent school board members not being re-elected or superintendent turnover.

Methodology

A sample for the study was gathered from Pennsylvania public school districts. In total, 502 public school districts were considered since those districts had elected school boards and they were operating school districts at the time of this study.

Philadelphia has an appointed board, and Pittsburgh did not elect its school directors when this study was conducted. Therefore, their "Boards of Public Education" are distinguishably different in character from all other boards of education in Pennsylvania.

The research was ex post facto and longitudinal in nature. The theoretical model had built-in progressions; i.e., following high conflict or strike, board and superintendent changes would occur and the prospect of accommodation existed. For this reason, information about the variables was requested for various time intervals. The year 1970 was a logical place to start the time line since that was the year Pennsylvania's Public Employe Relations Act was passed, giving public employees the "limited" right to strike. To provide a sufficient sample and allow for succeeding events to occur in districts with high labor-management conflict, the years 1970 through 1974, were chosen as the initial conflict period.

Because board and superintendent turnover would probably not occur the same year a school district experienced a strike but, rather after voters expressed their disenchantment through incumbent school board member defeat, a time lag had to be considered. Thus, the time period established for turnover was 1973 through 1976.

If new accommodation, as a result of conflict (strike) and any subsequent personnel turnover, was to be accomplished, the new leadership needed time to effect a change in policies. The indicator used in the study of new accommodation was contract settlement without conflict (strike) in any one, or several, of the 1976 through 1979 school years.

The sample consisted of 112 public school districts, of which 56 districts were identified as having high labor-management conflict during 1970 through 1974. An equal number of non-strike districts paired on the basis of size, wealth, and region, were selected to complete the sample.

A questionnaire, structured according to the timeline previously presented, was distributed to superintendents of the sample districts. Seventy-nine of the 112 (70.5 percent) superintendents returned usable questionnaires. Thirty-five were from high conflict districts and 44 were from non-strike districts.

The study data were coded, tabulated, and analyzed. A "crossbreak" - partitioning or "contingency-analysis" method was used to analyze the data. For each of the substantive hypotheses the frequencies were subjected to the Chi-Squared Test for Independence. The level of significance was .05 and critical values were established to determine if the null hypothesis was rejected for each test. This statistical test yielded no indication of the magnitude of the relation between variables. It was simply a test of independence of the variables and not a measure of the association. To provide a measure of association the "co-efficient of contingency" was calculated for each value. The smaller the absolute value, the weaker the association between the variables; the larger the absolute value the stronger that association.

Results

The findings for all hypotheses are summarized in Table 1. Results from testing the first three hypotheses were: In Hypothesis 1, the null hypothesis was rejected, indicating a statistical relationship existed between turnover of any kind and high labor-management conflict in negotiated contract settlements. The contingency co-efficient indicated, at .25, only a statistical relationship of moderate strength. Sub-hypothesis 1-a examined turnover limited to only school board member incumbent defeat. In this case the null was not rejected and no statistically significant association between this type of turnover and high conflict was found. For sub-hypothesis 1-b the null hypothesis was rejected. Sub-hypothesis 1-b had the strongest statistical relationship revealing superintendent turnover, alone, was related to high labor management conflict. A contingency co-efficient of .34 was found for this hypothesis.

Table 1

Statistical Test Results by Substantive Hypothesis and Related Statistics

Hypothesis	Chi-Squared Value	Probability	Co-efficient of Contingency
1	5.100	.03	.246
1-a	.202	.66	.051
1-b	10.226	.003	.239
2-c	3.343	.08	.295
2-nc	.631	.43	.119

Hypothesis 1 postulated that school districts which experienced a high conflict strike between 1970 and 1974 and had turnover of key personnel between 1973 and 1976 would more likely experience new accommodation, in the form of "peaceful" settlements, than would districts which had no turnover. Here, through the use of an alternative hypothesis, the statistical test was also applied to the sample of non-conflict districts. While the tests for neither the high conflict districts, nor the non-strike districts showed a significant relationship between turnover and new contract agreements, the co-efficients of contingency were slightly different. The magnitude of the relation between key district personnel turnover and new accommodation was greater in high conflict districts than in non-strike districts.

In an attempt to obtain further insight into this relationship, a cross-break analysis was computed by grouping the original high conflict districts into three classifications of both superintendent and board turnover, superintendent or board turnover, and no turnover. The analysis is presented in Table 2 and once again were not substantiated at the .05 level of confidence. The co-efficient of contingency however indicated an association between the variables.

Table 2
Turnover Following Strike

	Both Supt. and Board Member	Either Supt. or Board Member	None	N
2nd contract without strike	6	13	11	30
2nd contract with strike	1	0	4	5
N	7	13	15	35

chi-squared value 4.74, p= .10, co-efficient of contingency .344

Conclusions

Based on the findings certain inferences were made. First, labor-management conflict in schools was institutionalized through the formal collective bargaining process. The pathway to resolution was clearly marked by a series of procedures and corresponding rules. In Pennsylvania these rules were highly formalized and regulated by statute. When contract negotiations between public school employee unions and school boards reach an impasse, the final option for the union, in an attempt to force settlement was to strike. If the conflict escalated to a high level of discord, a strike of ten days or more was likely. The consequences of such a strike varied and this research project examined the affects on district leadership.

It appeared from the data analyses, that high conflict public employee strikes created unrest in the community concerning the practices employed in the governance of its schools. The constituents expressed their dissatisfaction by exercising their voting rights in an attempt to change the "personality" of the governing body.

Since the key power holders in school districts were board members and their chief executive officer, any desired change in policy must be initiated by them. Therefore, dissatisfied community voters may choose to defeat incumbent board members and elect insurgents who they think will take action to correct the undesirable situation or initiate steps to avoid further disruption. A second possibility

is that they perceive the administrative practices to be deficient and, therefore, defeat incumbents in order to elect new members who will carry out the public's mandate to correct the situation. Consequently the superintendent may be ousted.

These assumptions were made based on evidence gathered in this study. Of the 35 respondent high conflict districts, 20 experienced a change of key personnel in the three-year period following an employee strike. Forty-two incumbent board members were defeated, and 17 superintendents lost their positions. The relation between the level of conflict and turnover was statistically significant.

When considered as a unit, incumbent defeat and superintendent turnover, the assumptions held to be true. When examined separately, the situation changed. While the voter particiation may remain high, the constituents cannot directly affect the status of the superintendent. This research suggested a weak association of high labor-management conflict and incumbent defeat, but a stronger association between conflict and superintendent turnover. One possible explanation was that incumbent board members were in a position to anticipate the action the public was likely to take, and move to gain support from fellow members to make a personnel change, dismiss the superintendent, thus avoiding incumbent defeat.

The second consequence of intense public employee-employer conflict implies a possible change in values from those held by key personnel during the original conflict. If employee strikes between 1970 and 1974 were "first generation" strikes, "second generation" strikes, which followed personnel turnover, were considerably reduced in number. From the districts sampled, only one "first generation" strike had a "second generation" strike after turnover. This indicated that the turnover/new accommodation association could be significant, but, because of limited sample size, the statistical analysis did not support this notion.

Notes

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2 Margaret A. Ramsey, "Cultures and Conflict in Local School Districts," in Public Participation in Local School Districts, edited by Frank W. Lutz and Laurence Innaccone (Lexington, Massachusetts: D. C. Heath and Company, 1978), p. 56.

3 Dale Mann, "Democratic Theory and Public Participation in Educational Policy Decision-Making," in The Policy of the School, edited by Fredrick M. Wirt (Lexington, Massachusetts: D. C. Heath and Company, 1975), pp. 6-7.

4 Peter J. Cistone, "School Board Members Learn Their Skills Before They Become Board Members," The American School Board Journal 165 (January 1978): 32-33.

5 See Michael P. Smith, "Elite Theory and Policy Analysis: The Politics of Education in Suburbia," The Journal of Politics 37 (November 1974): 1007-1032 and David W. Minar, "Democracy in the Suburbs," Northwest Tri-Quarterly 4 (Fall 1962): 26.

6 Brooklyn C. Derr, "Conflict Resolution in Organizations, Views from the Field of Educational Administration," Public Administration Review 32 (September/October 1972): 495-501.

7 Lewis A. Coser, Continuities in the Study of Social Conflict (New York: The Free Press, 1967), p. 40.

8 Ralf Dahrendorf, Essays in the Theory of Society (Stanford California: Stanford University Press, 1968), p. 126.

9 Frank W. Lutz and Laurence Iannaccone, Public Participation in Local School Districts (Lexington Massachusetts: D. C. Heath and Company, 1978), pp. 101-103.